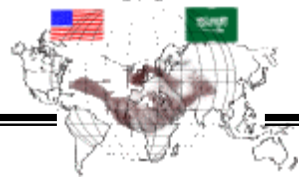


# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Item of Interest

April 17, 2004

## HONEY & ONIONS: A MEMOIR OF SAUDI ARABIA IN THE SIXTIES

BY FRANCES MEADE

### CHAPTER SEVEN

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#### **HONEY & ONIONS: A MEMOIR OF SAUDI ARABIA IN THE SIXTIES BY FRANCES MEADE**

##### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

The Saudi-American Forum is very pleased to present "Honey and Onions" by Frances Meade. This delightful memoir of the early days of Americans working and living in the Kingdom – in ten chapters – will be presented one chapter per week.

We hope you enjoy it and you will join in a discussion of the book.

<http://www.saudi-us-relations.org/ubbthreads/Post165>

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#### **HONEY & ONIONS: A MEMOIR OF SAUDI ARABIA IN THE SIXTIES BY FRANCES MEADE**

##### **CHAPTER SEVEN**

*We are gathered around a blazing campfire braving the cold on this desert winter night. Here a number of us come together each year for a weekend at the encampment of a friend. Surrounded by the carpeted tents where we will spend the night, we share a bounteous meal provided by our host. The weather means nothing; we generate our own climate of warmth in the companionship of those who share a love of the desert. Has anything really changed in thirty years?*

The stars were brilliant as we left the company camp in the oasis and headed into the darkness of the desert toward the faint lights of Ar Rass. Entering the town, we drove slowly through the narrow lanes flanked by high mud walls. It was long after nightfall, and the community had withdrawn into seclusion as desert people have always done with the setting of the sun. The glow of the lanterns behind the walls was the only sign of life at this hour; life being lived in a manner I could not imagine but hoped to glimpse this evening.

We had been asked to dinner by the Emir, whom Dick came to know during his days in the desert before I arrived in Saudi Arabia. He had heard that we were coming on an inspection trip of the company projects in the area and the invitation, which included me, was waiting for us.

I did not know what to expect on this my first venture beyond the urban scene, and I sat quietly, absorbing the atmosphere of the silent town while Dick and our translator chatted away. This night and this place seemed very familiar. Perhaps, I had read a description in a book, and the mental picture was now becoming a reality, or it may have been that an unwitting film maker had at some time struck exactly the right note and faithfully reproduced a scene that I had just wandered into. What should have been a completely alien atmosphere seemed more familiar than Riyadh. But then why not? This, after all, was the quintessential Arabia that we have all seen pictorialized -- and romanticized -- from the oriental fantasies of Roberts to the photographs of the *National Geographic*. Whether I was responding to the subconscious memory of such an image or simply reacting to the satisfaction of imagination fulfilled, I knew where I was and felt right at home.

We pulled up to the Emir's gate and were met with an enthusiastic welcome and led into his *majlis*, a rectangular room with carpets and cushions for us at one end facing a glowing hearth at the other. Flickering lamps cast shadows that seemed to lengthen the distance between us and the hearth where the servants were gathered. They emerged from the farther recesses of the room and swept down upon us, each with a stack of tiny cups in one hand and a distinctively beaked brass pot in the other. With a flourish, the coffee was poured and presented as we sat with our host reclining on cushioned armrests.

One by one, other guests joined us, the continuing motif of thobe and ghutra adding a dimension of color to the dimly lit room. Dick greeted those he knew, and we were both introduced to newcomers who were strangers to him as all of them were to me. Abdul Dahleh, our skillful interpreter, had the gift of carrying over the inflections and nuances of one language to the other so that the conversation flowed easily. His talent and the genuine interest and warmth of the Saudis did away with the awkwardness of indirect communication, and we were as comfortable as we would have been at a party of English speakers. Time passed quickly, the servants swooping down the room to pour coffee and tea, until dinner was announced.

I had been told beforehand that I would dine with the ladies of the house, but to my surprise, the Emir insisted that I come with the men into the dining room where a banquet had been spread upon the carpets. This room was brightly lit in contrast to the *majlis*, the better to appreciate the many dishes that were offered.

The Emir seated me at his right, and I decided that I had been misinformed about dinner with the ladies. It seemed to me that whether or not he was including me out of friendship for my husband, no one appeared to regard my presence as unusual. Certainly, I was being treated exactly the same as Dick, so apparently tradition was not as stringent as I had been led to believe.

I sank to the carpet, tucked my legs discreetly beneath me and did my best to behave appropriately and follow the Emir's lead in sampling the dishes. However, I simply couldn't get

the knack of rolling rice into a neat little ball to pop into my mouth. It must be an inherited art, and I was further handicapped as a left-hander by having to accomplish this impossible trick with my right hand. Everyone joined in the effort to teach me, but I ended up with very little rice and a great deal of grease on my hand so that when I was offered a piece of fruit I couldn't hold on to it, much to the general amusement. A servant appeared at that point with a pitcher and basin so that I might wash my hands and peel my orange.

About this time Abdul Dahleh offered the casual comment that it was too bad that the schoolteacher hadn't showed up. Only then did I find out that it had been arranged with the local Syrian lady who taught in the town school to be my escort and translator at the women's dinner. She had failed to appear and, fearing that I might be uncomfortable dining alone with the ladies who spoke no English, our host simply included me at the men's meal.

I was shocked and embarrassed when I realized that I was, indeed, an intruder in male territory. With his inherent grace and courtesy, the Emir had never given the slightest indication that my presence was unconventional -- and probably unwelcome -- nor did any of his guests. It was yet another tribute to the art of hospitality as it is practiced by a people who have carried the obligation of host to guest to the highest degree.

Trying to deal with this revelation as gracefully as possible, I begged Abdul Dahleh to tell the Emir that I was most anxious to meet the ladies, and I couldn't care less whether or not I had an interpreter. When this was relayed, there were immediate protests that I wouldn't be comfortable since we wouldn't be able to speak to each other, and I'd be better off where I was. But, I had my pride and insisted until someone was dispatched to bring a small boy to take me to the women's quarters.

We went out into the courtyard and up an outside staircase to the high point of the visit. For here were all the gaily-dressed members of the female side of the household gathered to meet me. I felt like a celebrity, for that's exactly how they treated me. And, what a wonderful time I had with them.

After the initial greetings and laughter at my graphic gestures of impatience with the men for keeping me away from them, we got down to some attempts at dialogue. I told them my name, and my hostesses eagerly responded by identifying themselves as well. With about twenty people in the room, it was soon apparent that I was becoming hopelessly confused, so they sorted themselves out into smaller groups of each wife with her children as well as a sub group of older female relatives who turned out to be sisters of the Emir. All this -- and all subsequent information -- was offered by means of some very clever pantomime with a good deal of pointing and counting of fingers accompanied by a flood of commentary that, although the words were unintelligible to me, told me volumes in tone and manner. The acting was of the best, and we traded charades to the amusement of the children who finally got up the courage to get into the act too.

As usual the children struck exactly the right note. They brought out some little school books, the kind that teach children to read by means of a picture on each page along with the identifying word, and our communication improved instantly. I would point to an illustration and give them

the English word, they would come back with the Arabic and then we would all practice the other's version with hilarity on both sides.

At some point, an emissary arrived to rescue me from what the men were sure was a difficult situation and a spirited dialogue ensued through the closed door as the ladies and I shouted back that we were having a fine time and to come back later.

Knowing that I had already eaten with the men, they insisted only that I have some sweets and tea as well as more fruit, and my vocabulary expanded along with my midriff.

Periodically, we would stop for a pop quiz and I would have to go around the room reciting names and then test them on the English words for various objects.

It was a wonderful party, and when the time came that I really had to leave, it was hard to break away and go back to the comparatively sedate gathering of the men. This was my introduction to the separate world of Saudi women, and the years have confirmed what I discovered that evening -- in Saudi Arabia, no matter where you may travel, the color, the fun and the freedom from inhibition are always to be found in the company of the ladies.

Travel to what were then remote areas of the kingdom was a special benefit of Dick's job. The company had set up semi-permanent installations for the crews who would supervise the construction of individual segments of the road system, and most of these projects were already in progress. The desert camps were strung across Arabia from Medina to the eastern edge of the Nafud, and the company maintained a twin-engine airplane to supply them.

The Beechcraft came complete with Sky King, as he was known to all, the archetypical bush pilot of adventure films and novels. Tall, with graying hair and steely blue eyes, he played the part to perfection and literally ruled the air. He kept his own schedules independent of company needs or policies and certainly without regard to the personal wishes of his passengers. But, his flying skills had been proven when he rescued the airplane, which had sat in the desert for a year after his predecessor had crash-landed it with the American Ambassador and his daughter aboard. Fortunately, no one had been hurt, but the plane remained there slowly filling with sand until Sky King came along and flew it out when nobody else could.

He was as temperamental as an opera diva and given to spontaneous flights to Beirut "to have the engines checked", but he was a great pilot to fly with who could always be counted on to find those little dirt landing strips among all the thousands of miles of beige landscape.

If he hadn't existed, he would have had to have been invented, so perfectly did he match my idea of an adventurer in Arabia. I loved flying with him and so did Woof, who had not returned to commercial flying after that first trip from Jeddah to Riyadh. If we had to spend some time in Jeddah, she was driven grandly to the airport by Ali Harbi, sitting in the back seat like a duchess, to be taken out to the plane where she occupied the copilot's seat. For a dog of exceedingly humble beginnings, she was literally flying high, and she would look out the window to watch the ground drop away and then settle herself comfortably for a journey that often included stops at the camps en route where she would be spoiled rotten by the cooks.

For me, flying the camp circuit with Sky King was a personal flying carpet ride, an extraordinary opportunity to explore the endless expanse of the desert kingdom in all its diversity. At small plane altitude, differences in the terrain were easy to distinguish, and the very nature of flight provided a unique perspective. It condensed into real time all the alterations that nature's forces have shaped over millions of years, and the changing landscape simply unrolled beneath us providing a natural history of the peninsula from sea to sea.

To drop out of the sky into an undulating sea of sand and find one of our small crews waiting for their mail and supplies was a surreal experience. What had they and their kitchens and showers and Land Rovers to do with the desert that engulfed them? Like latter-day Alexanders, they would conquer what had been unconquerable, turn it to the uses of the world and then move on having left behind the indelible imprint of civilization. Eventually, there would be a highway and with it would come the debris of travel -- ruptured tires, aluminum cans and a blossoming of plastic.

But, I didn't think of the consequences then. I could only enjoy being witness to the excitement of an immediate challenge that didn't allow for future concerns for the environment. A world was changing here, and, if only by marriage, I had become a part of it. It was exhilarating just to be present when new forces were being exerted on a land unchanged for centuries. We could spend a couple of hours to several days at any one camp, depending on whatever Dick's particular mission might be, and I often had plenty of time to scout the local communities and meet some of the inhabitants to whom I was often an object of interest as a western woman, in many cases, the first they had ever encountered. And, while it is true that in a public place I might gather a curious crowd, in private, I was accorded the same hospitality as my husband or the company engineers. In lovely old mud houses or a Bedouin tent, there was always the same gracious welcome I had received in Ar Rass.

Those were heady excursions for someone who had grown up on adventure and travel books. A day's drive by Land Rover might take us to two separate villages similar in architecture but strikingly different in color, depending on the content of the soil from which the mud blocks were made. A pink town like Bukhariyah contrasted sharply with the yellowish-white buildings of villages in areas that were rich in gypsum. Subtle differences in decoration could be spotted as well. In a tiny village near Hanakiyah, the few houses were embellished with something resembling bas-relief, a feature not found in any of its neighboring communities.

Everywhere, the essential design themes of desert architecture were played out with variations that spoke of the creativity of a people who could impose an individual aesthetic on a harsh and restrictive environment. There is something in the desert that breeds individualism, and it must be contagious. A young American woman, married to one of the Syrian contractors, chose to accompany him to live in the vastness of Qassim, and everything about her simple block home from her garden to her candle lit dinners spoke of her originality of spirit.

Infected by the same virus was one of our company wives, who created a festive holiday atmosphere at her husband's camp by stacking graduated tumbleweeds and decking the resulting structure with beautiful decorations in three sizes -- camel, donkey and goat droppings

respectively -- dried and sprayed with gold. She also conducted mandatory calisthenics classes each morning for the crew, a rather less welcome innovation.

Much as I loved flying the circuit, the jewel among my memories of the desert was the overland trip from Jeddah to Riyadh, circling northward through the camps. Perhaps, we were foolish in ignoring the basic rule of taking more than one vehicle on such a trek, but Dick had spent enough time in Qassim to know the landmarks; the camps were linked by radios so that someone always knew which way we were headed and how long it should take us, and ultimately, we had faith in the care of desert dwellers for the alien traveler. Whichever rationale prevailed I can't say, but it was a wonderful problem free trip.

Heading up the coast from Jeddah, we followed the shoreline until turning inland to Medina and a volcanic landscape of black basalt mountains and valleys. We passed ancient lava flows that looked as though a giant asphalt machine had already done the work that our contractors were just starting out to do and had paved the desert with a layer forty feet thick. Our first stop would be outside Medina, near the remains of the old Hejaz railroad at the westernmost of the construction projects.

It was a good day's drive on established roads, and we had yet to tackle the intricacies of cross-country travel, but the luxuries of a hot shower and comfortable bed had already become very appealing. The crews, isolated as they were, welcomed visitors, and the cooks dished up their best meals, which one felt obligated to consume in vast amounts before an evening of Scrabble, bridge or, in the event that we had arrived on the right night, a movie. Films traveled from camp to camp once a week via the Beechcraft and next to the mail were the cargo most eagerly awaited. If there was a town nearby, the audience was augmented by men and boys who might well be seeing the first movie of their lives. Years later at a party in Riyadh, I was introduced to a young Saudi Army officer who, upon hearing my name, told me that he not only remembered Dick, but the first movie he had ever seen was as a child at our camp in Ar Rass.

It was one way of reciprocating the hospitality offered to all of us by the people of the area. Although it couldn't match their scale of entertainment, it was at least a quid pro quo and served to enhance the relationship between the towns and the camps.

From Medina, our next leg would be north to Khaybar and the ruins of centuries old settlements whose agriculture had been sustained by the construction of massive earth dams to provide irrigation. One of the conditions of the company's contract with the Ministry of Communications was to register the discovery of either archeological or historical sites and relocate the highway in order to avoid the destruction of clearly visible remains of organized communities. It added another dimension to the work to realize that some of these finds had gone unrecorded before we arrived on the scene.

On one occasion, I watched, horrified, as a group of Bedouin pulled down the remains of a Roman arch and threw the ancient bricks into the bed of their Toyota pickup. But, my reaction was that of the uninitiated to the fundamentals of life in the desert; every useful object is hostage to human survival, and there is no room for the preservation of past glories in the struggle to live in the present.

Northeastward from Medina, the landscape became the familiar hard pan that characterizes so much of the northwestern region alternating with *sabka*, salt deposits, that might or might not conceal a soft and deadly substructure that could immobilize a vehicle. Now, the differences in terrain were less a matter of interest than survival.

An expanse of flat desert that encouraged fast driving would abruptly turn into a landscape of boulders too small and too thickly clustered to dodge and too big to drive through. This was a test of the skill of the driver, who could only negotiate them by finding space for one wheel on the ground while the opposite one took the ride up and over -- not unlike attempting to iron out a thousand and one speed bumps.

No matter what the topography or the condition of the ground, driving was always a matter of decision-making. The number of tracks that have crisscrossed the desert over the years has created a labyrinth of choice, and, like Alice in Looking Glass Land, you could be traveling towards a visible landmark and suddenly find yourself driving away from it. The trick was in the choosing of the track, and there were no rules as we discovered. Gut feeling in the absence of intimate knowledge of the desert was the best we could hope for, and most of the time it seemed to work, keeping us out of the soft spots in the sand and maintaining our heading in the direction we wanted to go.

Upon leaving each camp, we would radio ahead to our next stop and give them our time of departure so they could estimate our approximate driving time and know when to start searching if we didn't show up. But, we usually tried to factor in a little sightseeing time because there were so many attractions to lure us into side trips.

A lonely watch tower glimpsed on the horizon would lead us to the remains of a deserted village and speculation on what had happened to it and when. Flooding from a hundred-year rain? Disease? Warfare? Just to be in a place where such alternatives were not only possible but probable was an immense satisfaction to one of a romantic turn of mind. Pinch me, I'm really here -- that sort of thing.

And, what a lot of pinching it took when we came across the caravans, some of them so long that it took most of a day to pass a given point. There could be a thousand animals -- donkeys, sheep, goat -- but it was the camels that characterized the caravans, hundreds of them in slow dignified procession, some with curtained riding litters for the women and some laden with the paraphernalia of desert life as well as the milk herds with their young, all on the trek to renewed pastures, southward in the winter and back north with the coming of summer.

This was the Arabia of history, and aside from the rifles carried by some of the men, it was the same picture in every detail as it might have been centuries before. I was convinced that I was witness to the permanence of desert ways not realizing how imminent was the change sweeping across the measureless sands that would displace this scene forever.

However, there was another vista that has and will always remain as a testament to the past. Near Hanakiyah, a red sandstone butte stood alone rising from the desert floor, seemingly

unremarkable until we drove around to the far side and came into a small canyon. Here upon the rock face was a magnificent collection of petroglyphs dating, we later learned, from pre-Nabatean times. Tall, stylized figures remarkably similar in posture and ornament to those found in the American southwest, stood above us carved into the rock. With them were their herds of cattle with long gracefully curved horns and even a lean dog with a curled tail, much like a modern day saluki. In places the rock face had fallen, and we were able to examine the figures in detail. It was a discovery that our crew had reported to the Ministry, and subsequent studies have been made and published. To me, it was a testimony to the ageless relationship of man and desert that is impervious to change.

But, the towns of Qassim were not to survive in the same way. They would change dramatically and become the modern cities that they are today, but I didn't know that then and naively believed that these too would withstand the incursions of the developing world that would be expedited by the new roads and the ease of contact with the commercial centers of Jeddah and Riyadh.

The agriculture of Unaizah took the form of simple strip-farming to produce local cash crops to fill the needs of the inhabitants and their herds. Some vegetables reached the cities, but the more perishable and fragile types like tomatoes and grapes were easily damaged during the long and bone-rattling trip to market. When the highway system was completed, and the technology of pivot farming was introduced, this area became one of the kingdom's food baskets.

But, I saw Unaizah as a picturesque town of softly rounded mud houses with intricately carved plaster interiors testifying to the artistry and originality of its craftsmen. The very restrictions of Islam on graphic representation seem to bring out the creativity of designers in their invention of endless permutations of geometric patterns. One can see the same result in the genius of the calligrapher brought to bear on that distinctively Arab art form.

The green setting of Unaizah was truly an oasis to us, and we happily picnicked in the tamarisk groves that surrounded it and browsed through its souk. The souk was a particularly attractive one in a mud-columned arcade in the center of town. There were a number of female vendors of much the same kind of merchandise that was to be found in the *harim* souk in Riyadh, but I didn't know enough to buy more of the Nejd jewelry that was on display -- I was still under the impression that it would always be around, and I regret the lost opportunities to preserve more of it. The same good humor and warmth prevailed among the women, and I thoroughly enjoyed the market of Unaizah.

Buraidah, the nearest neighboring town, was very different both in appearance and atmosphere. The strictest observance of Islamic law and tradition discouraged the presence of foreigners and precluded the ease of entering into public life that we had grown used to. But, driving through the central market area, we discovered that we had been lucky enough to arrive on the day of the camel auction and spent some time watching the colorful proceedings from the Land Rover. A bull camel is not easily displayed for sale if he is not so inclined, and there was a Saudi version of the running of the bulls in Pamplona before sufficient numbers of very brave and determined men convinced this particular camel that he was not in a position to choose whether or not he was on the auction block.

Of all the camps, the one in Ar Rass had my vote as the absolute best. In a nearby oasis, the contractor had found an old Turkish fort, and its barracks and had turned it into a mini resort complete with a minimal, but usable, swimming pool and lights placed among the palm trees to enhance night time barbecues.

This was also the area where Dick had spent most of his time in the desert when he first arrived in Arabia, so familiarity played a significant part in its charm for us. My original welcome never suffered from repetition, and both of us felt very much at home in Ar Rass.

The easternmost camp at the tiny village of Riyadh Al Khabra faced the most challenging project. Their section of the highway, which would cross an area of dunes on the edge of the Nafud desert, presented the problem of dealing with the shifting sands, which drift and ultimately cover whatever is in their way. A unique design solution was devised by the American resident engineer, a veteran of the Indian Service in New Mexico. Rather than cut through, the road would ride the top of the dunes and help to stabilize the sands while the prevailing winds would sweep it clean. It was a fascinating concept and one which proved itself when the construction was complete.

This was our last stop, and we left the area through one of the most dramatically situated towns I have ever seen. Zilfi crouched at the foot of the high dunes, a graphic metaphor for the endless struggle that humans wage against an encroaching desert. Looking back as we headed toward Riyadh, this picture was a fitting fadeout to a journey that I will always remember as one of the most meaningful in my time in Saudi Arabia.

Has the desert changed? Our use of it most certainly has, and today's desert dwellers enjoy a style of life equal to that of the cities. The ease with which we travel tempts us to dismiss it as just another landscape glimpsed through the window of a car at high speed. But, there is an immutable quality to the desert, an exotic mixture of beauty and danger, unforgiving and cruel to the unwary. Only the ignorant believe that it has been shaped and tamed. Those of us who respect the desert know better.

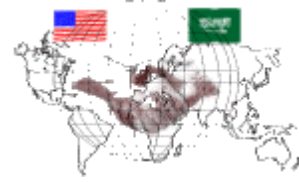
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### **About the Author**

**Frances Meade** is an American who has lived in Saudi Arabia since 1965. Born in New York, she and her family moved to Arizona in the '50s and still call it home. She has a degree from Mount Holyoke College and has written and edited educational texts as well as a monthly magazine column.

## **ABOUT THE SAUDI-AMERICAN FORUM**

The Saudi-American Forum is an information service designed to provide you timely information -- background and current issues - - impacting the Saudi-U.S. relationship.



The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

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